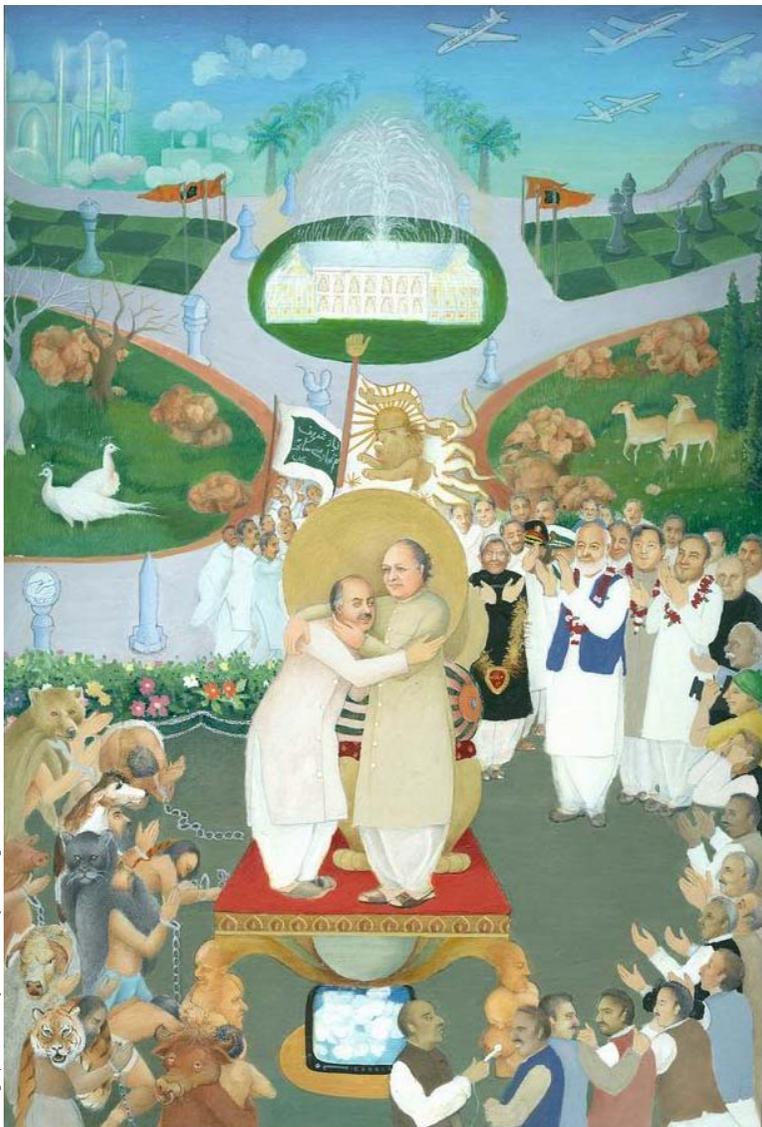


Photographs courtesy Asia Society Washington Center



Saira Wasim *Padashahnama*, 1999 (one of three in a series)
Gouache, gold on tea stained wasli paper (several sheets of paper
glued together and rubbed until shiny and smooth).



Ahsan Jamal *For Office Use Only*, 2004
Mixed media on wasli and board

“Partitions” Explores Spirit of Indian, Pakistani Art

By LEA TERHUNE

Contemporary
South Asian artists’
works displayed
in eclectic group
exhibition in
Washington, D.C.

Vivid colors and subtle hues, painstakingly executed miniatures and bold images on canvas and paper, all convey aspects of South Asian culture in “Partitions: An Exhibit of Contemporary Paintings from Pakistan and India,” organized by the Asia Society Washington Center and curated by Koli Banik.

The goal of the September 28 to October 26 exhibition was less to chronicle the historical Partition of the two countries than



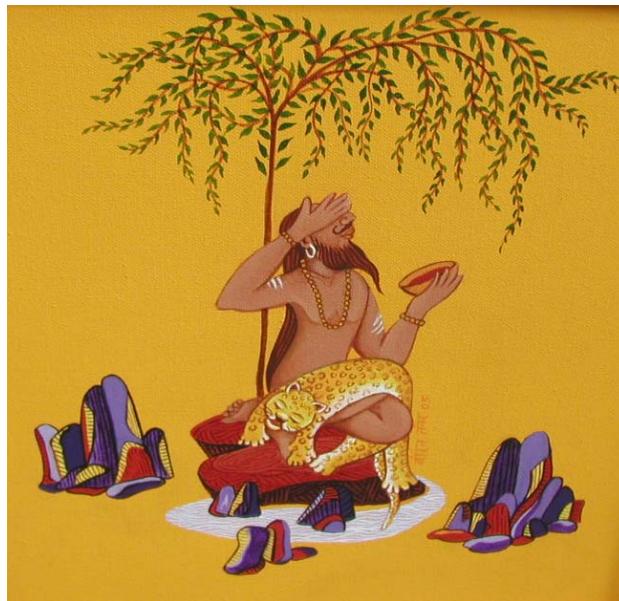
Hasnat Mehmood *Untitled, 2006, gouache and paper collage on wasli*

“to explore divisions at a deeper level.” The Partition of India and Pakistan at their independence from Britain in 1947 precipitated violence in which hundreds of thousands of people died, as Hindus and Sikhs fled to India, Muslims to Pakistan, and many others were caught up in a chaotic transition. Families were torn apart in a population exchange that uprooted more than 14 million people during the months after independence. Scars of the Partition remain in the psyche of South Asians, evident in the many attempts in literature and the arts to analyze its impact on both sides of the border.

The artists included in the “Partitions” exhibition, hosted by an architectural firm, HNTB Architecture, conveyed various aspects of the Indian and Pakistani experience. Political concerns dominated the Pakistani offerings, while religious and spiritual themes ran through the Indian works. According to curator Banik, miniature painting is used as a vehicle for political statements more often in Pakistan than in India.

“The contemporary art movement in South Asia has proliferated in the last four years,” she said, which is why she felt this exhibition was timely. “There is growing interest in what is being produced there,” she said. Banik wanted to show “glimpses of what’s going on in Pakistan and India,” to compare and “explore commonalities as well.”

Chhotu Lal from Rajasthan, the center of miniature painting in India, is inspired by the spiritual traditions of his country. His works on the relationship of mind, body and soul give a modern perspective



Viren Tanwar
Every Life Has a Story, 2006
(partial view, one of five in a series)
Acrylic on canvas and wood

Chhotu Lal
Power of the Soul, 2006, gouache on handmade paper



on *shlokas* (verses) from Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. “The Ulta Tree” (2006) and the series “Mind I” (2005), “Mind 2” (2006), “Power of the Soul” (2006) and “Divine Dimension” (2006) all explore this theme. A rampant griffin and Rajput prince sit above a lotus-covered “ego.” Chhotu Lal’s colors are subtle, and his use of geometric shapes appealing.

Rameshwar Singh, like Chhotu Lal, did his graduate studies at Udaipur University in Rajasthan. His exuberant acrylic-on-

canvas paintings celebrate the folk traditions of India in vibrant reds, greens and yellows. His depictions of Hindu god Ganesh—“An Invitation to a Wedding” (Reserving the Wedding Date, 2006), “Shri Ganesh 1” (2006), “Shri Ganesh II” (2006)—incorporate calligraphy and a bright color scheme. “Horse Play” (2006) and “Radha with Flowers” (2006) interpret subjects of ancient folk art—horses, parrots and women—in a modern composition. He painstakingly embosses old handmade paper, which he paints and

burns to achieve unique effects.

Saira Wasim, from Lahore, Pakistan, is an adept miniaturist who uses her skills for political commentary. Her works “Padashahnama 1” (1999) and “Padashahnama 2” (1999) satirically depict former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the style of the Mughal miniature. Leading Pakistani politicians, clerics and military officials, portrayed in accurate detail, are distinctly recognizable. In “Padashahnama 1,” Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf is depicted with a lopsided halo.





Rameshwar Singh

Horse Play, 2006

Acrylic on canvas

Arts in Lahore, the only institution that offers a degree in Mughal-style miniature painting. It customarily is learned at the feet of a master in a *gurukul*, where students and teacher live and work in proximity.

Indian artist Viren Tanwar rounded out the exhibition with his series “Every Life Has a Story,” using acrylics on canvas and wood. Tanwar, who is known for large paintings, agreed to paint small canvases for this exhibit. His paintings depict encounters between lovers, a guru teaching and other events of life. “Life is for living to the brim and writing one’s own story because every life has a story to tell!” Tanwar wrote.

“These artists are not so well known outside South Asia,” Banik said, although Wasim and Mehmood have exhibited their work in New York galleries, where South Asian art increasingly has become popular.

According to Sotheby’s Auction House, in recent auctions, paintings by noted South Asian artists sold for \$50,000 to \$70,000 on average, with the truly famous artists fetching more. Banik, a native of Washington, whose interest in art led her to curate this, her first exhibition, wants to see more South Asian contemporary art in the U.S. capital. 4

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“Cricket Match” (2004) gives the same treatment to a cricket match between India and Pakistan, using it as a metaphor for the state of the relationship between the two countries.

Wasim is known for thought-provoking themes. This is evident in her series “Honor Killings,” about women and girls who are murdered by family members for perceived disgraces to the family’s honor.

Pakistani art historian and critic Attequa Ali wrote, “Wasim draws attention to a subject that she believes many people in the country ignore,” engaging viewers in dialogue about issues.

Pakistani artist Ahsan Jamal contemplates the Partition in his series “For Office Use Only 1-4.” He

employs Mughal-style portraiture to create sets of miniature side-by-side paintings depicting one Indian and one Pakistani doing the same kinds of work. Soldiers, rickshaw drivers, fruit vendors, tailors—all in typical dress—gaze out amiably at the viewer. The ordinary becomes oddly moving when set against the personal and political reality of the Partition.

Hasnat Mehmood, who lives in Jhelum, Pakistan, uses his expertise as a miniaturist to express modern, political and personal ideas. His compositions, which convey immediacy, may utilize silhouettes, as in “Neanderthal Man” (2006), newspaper clippings or scraps of poetry, as in “Untitled” (2006). Mehmood teaches miniature painting at the National College of